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Chapter VIII. Songs and Legends

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533 Singing is an important aspect of Miao life. Regardless of sex and age, almost all of them are talented singers. When we were traveling in the Miao mountains, the clear voices of Miao singers always struck our ears. In the deep woods of the high mountains with no one in sight, it usually gave us the poetic feeling that,

"The singing has ended; no one is in sight;
Only some mountain peaks remain green above the river."

831 Singing is the most natural medium of communication between
152 human hearts. The Miao have made full use of it. When a man
533 and woman fall in love, they sing to each other in order to express their mutual admiration. Inexpressibly happy at a reunion after a long separation, they sing to each other to express their happiness. Bidding farewell at a crossroad, they sing to express their sorrow at parting. Worn out during the busy seasons of agricultural work, they sing for physical relaxation. On festive occasions, they sing to add to the gaiety. In short, all their emotions—misery and happiness, grief and joy—are frankly expressed by singing.

533 Usually they sing their songs in dialogue style—such as between a man and a woman or between a host and a guest, etc. Due to long use, many of the songs have become formalized, so that the words of the replies are fixed. The ability to sing is very important in Miao social relations. For instance, their marriage is usually
584 based upon love. And singing is the principal means of courting.
533 /71/ On the fine spring days, Miao boys and girls usually go out in groups to sing to one another on the neighboring slopes. As the singers gradually draw closer, at this point, if you are a talented singer capable of answering your counterpart in the proper way,
533 victory will be yours. Otherwise, if the singing beauties move
[571] away because of poor answers, how depressed you would feel! At a fine banquet, when the hosts and guests sing alternately to each other, the good singers are always admired by the audience while

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533 We have copied a great many of the Miao songs above. These songs, because they have been made rigid through writing, have lost their original freshness and spontaneity. Moreover, the errors the Miao made in /89/ writing them out have rendered the songs sometimes almost unreadable. It is a great pity that the real charm and wit displayed in Miao songs cannot be appreciated from the pages here!

(3)

538 The moods conveyed to us by Miao songs, when they were sung,
●152 were not those of loftiness and tragedy, but rather those of tenderness and delicate pathos. There are many breaks in the singing, but the tune during these breaks merely lengthens and weakens, the lingering sounds of the music not breaking off. Thus, it takes a
533 fairly long time to finish the singing of each song. Those songs which are sung as counterparts are started first by one in a group of persons. He stops at the end of the fourth line, and the opposite party will continue the singing with an answering part for another four lines. Then the first singer will pick up the singing again. In this manner, the singing is kept on with every four lines sung alternately by the two opposing parties. The form of Miao songs, as can be seen from the examples given above, is of two kinds: One kind has seven characters to a line. Most of the Miao songs are of this kind. The other kind has three-character lines alternating regularly with seven-character lines. Because of the difference in form, these two groups of songs are sung in different ways, which will be illustrated here. For example, in the singing of a song of
533 the first kind, take the following words:
534 "Jen hua tu ch'uan pu k'an shui, yin chiu t'an to yeh shih hsien."

/People will say that like rowing a boat while ignoring the water, drinking as much as one wants is a waste./ (Excerpt from a Miao song). They are sung in the following manner:

(The dash between the words indicates the lengthened, carried-over tones from the preceding words).

4:Mickey E-5 (1940-?) 1947 AE5 Miao AE5

I found them friendly and hospitable, but without a sense of relative values. The family with whom I lived would accept no money for the rooms, all the rice I could eat, and all the firewood I needed for heating and cooking. In addition, now and then they brought me vegetables from their own gardens, included me in their feasts, and gave me a bit of something special at other times. But, once I began to knit caps for them and give them medicines, prints of individual snapshots, and a treat for the children upon my return from market, they expected me to continue all those things for themselves and all their relatives, even when the war made communications difficult and prices, accordingly, increasingly high.

They were less conventional than the Chinese, though that does not mean that they lacked social standards. For instance, children were repeatedly rebuked when they went between the fire and those who were sitting around it. At feasts it was considered inhospitable should the host or hostess allow a guest's wine bowl to become empty. No guest ever left the village emptyhanded. Men and women, girls and boys mingled freely, for they considered themselves one large family. There was much goodnatured teasing and repartee. Children, however, often gave way to tantrums and some rather heated arguments took place among adults on occasion. One morning some of the older men of the village were discussing something with the old man of our family. Not only did the talking get loud and sarcastic in tone, but some one of them broke a bowl by throwing it onto the stones of the court outside his room. But on the whole the Miao village was a very pleasant place in which to live.

Language. Dr. Li Fang-kuei [14] told me that he considers the Miao dialects a distinct language group, belonging to the Sinitic family of languages. They have no written language. My informant, however, declared that the Cowrie Shell Miao speak the ancient Chinse dialect spoken in Kiangsi at the time their ancestor migrated. There are either seven or nine tones — authorities differ as to

[14] At that time acting director of the Section on Philology of the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica.

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A M 593 858 [152] reached an age when they can think for themselves. Jealousy also seems to play no great role among the adults; at any rate, among the Meau I could not find any manifestation of this trait. Meau parents are very loving toward all their children and, as was pointed out, regard them as their most precious possession.

A M 515 593 I repeatedly had the opportunity to observe how wives delouse their husbands while the latter were simultaneously performing this charitable act on their children (Ill. 62).[1] The parasites that they caught were placed between the thumb nails and cracked with pleasure. It was a picture of a family idyl!

M 593 [595] [425] [758] [276] [185] [614] [736] The love of the chief of the Meau for his wives and his children was always apparent. Concerning this, I noted in my journal: "He never disposes of their property without consulting them. If they are sick, he is meticulous in providing them with everything they need, even with opium." I have asked many Meau parents what their goal was in rearing their children. In the plans they mentioned, the idea of security was decidedly secondary, as is only natural. After all, the sib takes care of its members, and even if later on a person should survive all the other members of his sib, he would, if it came to the worst, place himself as an unfree person under the protection of an existing powerful sib (see the chapter, "Social Organization," the section on "Organization of the Family"). Of the

M 185 eight persons whom I asked about this, only one made a remark in which one could see the idea of security implied, but more as referring to himself. He was a chief with three wives and many children. He said to me: "Yes, now I am well off; I am rich and have many children who work for me. But when I was young, things were different. I was all alone with my first wife; we were poor and had to work hard, and yet we were hardly able to make a living, and we often had to go hungry."

M [858] The educational ideals of the Meau, which became manifest from the answers to my questions on the subject, differed according to the individual talents of the parents. Aside from that, however, they did not differ essentially among the two sexes. /Colored Pl. I appears here on an unnumbered page./

[1] [See cat 116, P450-ANALYST]

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M 114 847 848 an attempt is made, with the help of medicines, to bring about an abortion. If this is unsuccessful, the child is abandoned after birth and dies of hunger." These statements, which Abadie (2) repeats verbatim, do not agree, as has been said.

with my findings.

M 827 582 [163] Among the Meau the average age of marriage for the young men is between sixteen and seventeen, that of the girls about four years later.

In explanation of this age difference, I was told that it is only after this age that a girl's body is strong enough to bear without harm the minimum of ten children expected of a woman. Earlier births are said to weaken the organism, and the women turn into invalids and are no longer able to do the proper amount of work. The /94/ young men, on the other hand, are able to beget strong children at a much earlier age.

M 595 [152] [554] As a consequence of this attitude the first wife of a Meau is generally older, more mature, and stronger than her husband. The younger, later wives can therefore be all the more easily absorbed into the household, especially since jealousy plays no role at all. The first wife is the chief wife, to whom all the other wives are subordinate in every respect. Accordingly, she has a position of trust within the community.

A 864 [513] [893] Among the Akha the father sleeps with the unmarried sons, the mother with the unmarried girls, each in one room of the dwelling. During the night the father visits the mother, or vice versa, "when everybody is asleep," as my informant put it. Thus, even in the parents' house there is no barrier to

A M [842] prevent the children from observing sexual activities from the earliest age. Like the Meau, the Akha, too, are well acquainted with the physiological aspect of paternity. Nevertheless

A 836 sexual freedom for unmarried persons prevails among them

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585 As a rule, marriages are concluded in the dry season, preferably between New Year and the beginning of the work in the fields.

589 585 [301] Among the Meau, on the wedding day, the bride's parents, according to their means, provide their daughter with silver neck ornaments and rings, and sometimes also with blankets which were bought at the market. The /100/ rest of the trousseau depends on the industry and skill of the girl, who has had to prepare it carefully over the years. This is why the trousseau of a girl from a simple family is often considerably more beautiful than that of a daughter of a distinguished household, even if the poor girl usually lacks the silver ornaments and purchased goods. The latter, on the other hand, sometimes are the entire trousseau of a rich, pleasure-seeking, and therefore lazy girl, according to my informant.

585 The bride is led to the groom's house by her mother and all her kinswomen. As soon as their approach is announced by the scouts posted for this, the bridegroom, accompanied by his parents and relatives, goes out to meet her. The bride is now festively greeted, but without dancing, and is led by the bridegroom [152] into the house of his parents. This often makes the bride weep, for with this step into marriage her life up to this time is ended and an uncertain future begins. Now the head of [782] [769] the large /extended/ family makes a sacrifice to the ancestors, informs them that a new member of the family has been received, and asks them to give her the same protection that they extend to the other members of the family.

[574] [554] [273] Everybody sits down to the feast, which lasts far into the night. As a rule three pigs are slaughtered for it, but among poor people there may be fewer and among rich people more; in addition plenty of alcohol distilled from rice or maize is served, but no beer. The bride spends the first three nights with the unmarried girls of the family, and not until the fourth evening does she move to the bed of her husband [513] [595] in his sleeping quarters, which he, as a married son of the house, has exclusively for himself and his wives. Here she shares his bed with him and, in case he is already married, with his other wives.

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Miao AE5

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M /460 cont./
147 somewhat soft /461/ and plaintive, especially in comparison
M with the Akha women, who are superior to them in hardiness, as
147 these people generally are in relation to the Meau. I found
482 among the Meau of both sexes particularly good and reliable
[609] porters, though, in general, they perform porter-service for strangers very unwillingly. After they had once declared themselves ready to come to terms, however, the men as well as the women, without another word, took on loads up to 50 kilograms, walked along with these on their backs so rapidly that we could hardly keep up with them, and steadfastly kept their promise.

M The opposite of this pronounced mountain-folk character
147 of the Meau is formed by their valley-dwelling neighbors, the
181 Lao and the Schan /Shan/, who represent typical tropical peo-
171 ple of the valley lowlands. They are accustomed to having Nature pour everything from her horn of plenty into their laps without any effort, they love idleness, and they are lazy and indolent, for a single annual harvest abundantly feeds the family. They, too, are cheerful, but unreliable and flighty. The Lao were indeed easy to persuade to serve as porters, but they would complain even if the loads weighed only 18 kilograms and usually ran away after one day!

M The Meau treat women and children, as well as the
576 subordinates and unfree (see the chapter, "Social Organization," the section, "Age Classes, Secret Societies, Rank Organization") well throughout and are courteous to superiors without being humble. Abadie (1) also points out: "The Meau women are

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1. Page 151.

cheerful, gay, and not very shy, especially when they have acquired confidence."

M Among one another the Meau are very friendly and
571 have a pronounced property sense. Whereas with regard to foreign
[648] people any violation of their property rights immediately arouses
[652] their warlike instincts, among the unmarried lads even the female sex cannot provoke any deep enmities; for these reasons duels
M are unknown. Such behavior is quite plausible in view of their
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/462 cont./

181 [153] Their reaction to new impressions is remarkably quick, according to my observations, and stands in marked contrast to that of primitive peoples, as well as to that of the neighboring high-culture peoples, such as the Schan /Shan/ or Lao. In any case, it is established that in the case of the Meau there is no question at all of "primitives." Von Eickstedt (3), too, confirms

3. II, p. 57.

this: "These are no 'primitives.' On the contrary, they are a [177] dislodged tribe with a unique culture definitely from China, but not typically Chinese, driven out by the true Chinese and most strongly influenced by them. These people have their own language and their own tradition."

152 148 It was interesting to observe the behavior of the Meau who accompanied us into the cities of northern Thailand. Toward the Lao and Thai, they were by no means servile, but only modest, and yet proud /463/ and reserved. Impressed, Savina (1)

1. II, p. 184.

describes this pride of the Meau, which, interwoven with an episode, he depicts: "Once when we were traveling with some Meau and rested for a moment in a village of the Thai, whose inhabitants had a dispute with the Meau, great thirst tormented us. The Meau, however, preferred to walk another four kilometers rather than ask the Thai for a glass of water." How very much the Meau, as true mountain people, suffer from homesick- 152 ness when circumstances force them to leave their mountains was obvious even during the few days that they spent with me in the valleys. It is again Savina (2) who has also recorded this trait.

2. II, p. 177.

He tells of several Meau in a prison who would not eat and grew visibly emaciated. When asked the reason, they all answered: "We are thinking too much of our homes." A few days later, they were released and regained new strength immediately.

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152 Emotions are readily apparent among the Meau. When a woman told us that three years ago her three sons had died of cholera within a few days, tears came into her eyes and she sobbed violently, though she was trying to master her emotions.

152 734 We were often able to observe how tenderly the Meau care for their sick. For example, a shaman had a completely paralyzed son about 22 years of age, who, however, was very active mentally. During the very first days of our stay, the old man carried his son on his back into our camp to ask me for help and healing. When I explained to him the hopelessness of the situation -- it was a case of progressive paralysis -- tears ran down his cheeks. Indeed, he had already so often beseeched his ancestors for help and offered them many sacrifices in vain. Nevertheless from then on the Meau always carried his son into our camp whenever I had some business with him, and tenderly laid him down near us so that he could participate in our conversations and thus be diverted.

156 123 The Meau are good-natured and companionable. In this connection I recall with what matter-of-fact hunting comradeship one Meau relieved me of my gun and rucksack and loaded them on his own back when he saw that, under the burden, I could scarcely keep up with his rapid pace in the steep thicket.

123 577 /464/ The Meau are almost excessively polite, without any influence on this behavior by materialistic mental reservations. Their innate politeness sometimes leads the Meau to little "white lies," which, however, according to their conception, are not regarded as lies. I had with me a white goat which was supposed to serve as tiger bait and had given it to the Meau to pasture in the maize fields. One day a Meau came to me and said: "Your goat seems to be sick. It has a wound in the stomach and has no appetite. I think that it will soon die." I, of course, had the goat brought to me immediately. It only had the skin on its stomach scratched a bit, and otherwise the animal was completely healthy. Later on it turned out that it had been in the way of the Meau during their harvesting.

39: Bernatzik--630 E-5 (1936-1937) 1947 AO1 Thailand
Miao AE5

152 556 The Meau are not greedy. In spite of their hard life, money and property play a less important role than the lives of human beings. In reply to my question, "If your house were on fire, what would you save first?" I repeatedly received the answer from the Negro peoples, and from the Akha, too, for that matter: "My money" or "My ornaments." The Meau, on the other hand, said without thinking twice: "First the people, and last of all the cash."

439 435 The behavior of the Meau who accompanied me into the valleys was interesting. As a people with little talent for business, and in addition without any opportunity to compare the prices which are offered or demanded of them by the migratory traders who seek out their villages, they now saw in the valley cities the same commodities offered at prices which amounted to only a fraction of those that they were accustomed to paying the traders. Nevertheless, no buying mania seized the Meau. They bought only articles that they had carefully considered beforehand, especially yarn, copper kettles, blue cloth for making men's clothing, and, in only one case, under the first impact of the uprooting, a Japanese man's shirt. When they thought that they had covered their needs, the rest of their money was carefully put away, and they immediately decided to acquire wives for their sons with it in their homeland.

574 [123] It was obvious to us that we owed them, whose hospitality we had enjoyed in the mountains, maintenance during these days. For every handful of rice they repeatedly thanked us, though they /465/ must have regarded our hospitality as a matter of course. No wanderer, even a stranger to the tribe, will ask in vain for lodging or food in a Meau village. The Nordic proverb, "Nobody roams through Lappland's mountains without being hungry," could be exactly reversed: "Everybody roams through the forested mountains of the Meau well fed." To be sure, for the European it should be added that for our taste the food of the Lapps, for example, salted coffee with cut-up reindeer cheese or dried raw reindeer meat and the like, is not particularly agreeable or to our taste, whereas the food of the Meau is often not only tasty, but altogether wholesome.

39: Bernatzik--631 E-5 (1936-1937) 1947 AO1 Thailand
Miao AE5

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123 574 We experienced this hospitality of the Meau on several occasions. For example, when I visited one Meau village, the chief was absent. Nevertheless, his son provided me generously with all kinds of foodstuffs, though the harvest had not yet begun and the Meau themselves were therefore very short of food supplies, and my wife and I, as well as my porters and accompanying persons, represented a crowd of people who needed a great deal. When the chief returned from hunting after about eight days, I wanted to pay for everything, but he declined: "You are the first Whites to visit my village. I am glad that my people were in a position to give you hospitality, and I would never accept any compensation for something that is taken for granted." He was not to be dissuaded from this viewpoint.

574 648 The attitude of the Meau toward the Yumbri (Phi Tong Luang) is likewise typical. These shy nomads of the primeval forest, who lead their primitive existence in the forests colonized by the Meau, who are regarded by the Lao, Tin, Kamuk, and the other neighboring peoples as evil spirits, are murdered or are cheated and exploited in the most brutal ways, and whose fear of other people therefore knows no bounds, have confidence only in the Meau. The latter do not take advantage of their superiority over the primitives and grant them protection, help, and even shelter at the warming fireplace, when they knock at their doors, hungry and drenched by the rain, and offer their scanty forest products in exchange for rice or meat. The special hospitality of the Meau is mentioned by many authors, /466/ for example, by Savina (1) and Abadie (2). At any rate, it shows how little

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1. II, pp. 189 and 232.

2. Page 151.

greedy the Meau are.